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Physiognomy : A critical review.

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Abstract. *— Physiognomy, or study of facial characteristics, is practiced daily, either consciously or unconsciously in anticipation of knowing what behaviour to expect from people with whom we associate in private and public life. Physiognomy was in use as far back as 16th century. It remained a subject of debate at the turn of 20th century. In this article the authors attempt to review the applications of Physiognomy. The article ends with the authors perspective that although a man may have particular facial features during the early years of his life, his character can be altered by his religious inclination, education, environment and attitude to life.*

Key words *: Physiognomy, character, attitude, discrepancies*

Introduction :

The term Physiognomy, is derived from three Greek words : *physis* (nature), *Nomos* (law) and *gnomon* (judge or interpreter) and means, 'to know nature *(Percival, 1999)*. According to the art of physiognomy the face is a signature of an individual in flesh and bone and it remains the frontline against imposture.

Historical background:

Face readers plied their trade in China before Confucius. Aristotle devoted six chapters of *Historia Animalium* to physiognomy *(Bates & Cleese, 2001).* As a science related to anthropometry, physiognomy was studied by Charles Bell, James Parsons and Johann Caspar Lavater. *Lavater (1806)* described physiognomy as the science of the correspondence between external and internal man, the correspondence between what is visible superficially and what he is in reality on the inside. The basis of physiognomic science is the assumption that a man's character and emotions are clearly readable in his countenance *(Barasch & Bocchi, 1979)* Artists like Leonardo da Vinci took a deeper interest in the facial feaures. He assumed that the face showed some indication of the nature of men, their vices and complexion. Sir Charles Bell (1774-1842), a surgeon and anatomist of considerable artistic skill, suggested in his thesis that man's facial expressions were peculiar to the individual and portrayed his emotions that were associated with intellect, not shared by animals. *(Cule, 1993).*

In this analysis of the visible demonstration of emotion, Bell propounded that the associated facial musculature, together with that of subsequent mastication, influenced bone structure at the points of muscle origin and insertion and were thus responsible for generic facial structure. Exaggeration of these transposed to human faces portrays unpleasing characteristics and in representational drawings achieved a portrayal of ugliness. In the portrayal of emotion *Parson (1806-1875)* believed that those with the best proportioned faces could be possessed of happy as well as unhappy temperaments. The claims for a relationship between physique and intelligence are based on weak data and have been greatly exaggerated. No ultimate connection between body build and temperament has been found *(Collins, 1999)*

Anatomical interpretations :

The forehead is the principal seat of reasoning, reflective and perspective qualities *(Wells, 1970)* Prominence of the lower part of forehead is indicative of a desire to see the world, to study science, learn languages and master matters of fact. Fleshy and blunt foreheads show obtuseness of mind, dullness of comprehension and weakness of understanding. Large and prominent eyes indicate power of expression. Deep-seated penetrating eyes suggest far sightedness and shrewdness. Upward and oblique eyes are seen in cunning, plotting and enthusiastic people. In men a large nose is suggestive of strong character and endurance, whereas in women a large nose is suggestive of aggressiveness and of dominance. A short, flat and upturned nose indicates weakness, inquisitiveness and dependant nature. A large mouth shows possession of good character. If the corners of the mouth are drawn downwards, it shows a gloomy and morose nature. A pointed and narrow chin indicates that the person may be crafty while a small and square chin shows an affectionate nature. If the chin is retreating, the person may show lack of

perseverance and feebleness of organization. Large ears suggest generosity while small ears suggest greed for money *(Wells, 1870).*

Nature has divided the face into three primary or primitive divisions. The upper zone runs from the hairline to just above the eyebrows. The forehead is concerned with mathematical skills and reasoning. The middle zone is from the eyebrows to the base of the nose. This area is concerned with mechanical and practical skill, executive qualities and artistic and literary skills. The lower zone extending from the base of the nose to the chin is concerned with domestic, moral and social qualities. *(Stanton, 1974).*

It has also been suggested *by Wells, (1870)* that if the upper zone is widest between the temples the person is intellectual. If it is longest, the person is rational and logical with a good memory and can make decisions. If it is shortest the person is thought to be illogical and absent-minded. If the middle zone is widest between the cheekbones the person is emotional. If it is longest, the person has a good command over the feelings and emotions. It also shows a good mind for business. If it is shortest the person is irrational and oversensitive. If the lower zone is widest at the jaw the person is one who gives immediate responses. If it is longest it suggests him to have common sense, wisdom and strength of will and determination. If it is shortest it suggests the person to be immature and dependent on others.

Practical applications :

Physiognomy is helpful in determining the character of a person whose character is otherwise unknown. It is helpful while recruiting candidates for jobs, in assessing the ability of candidates while teaching and also helps in counseling. It is also very helpful in understanding people where team work is needed.

Wells (1870) also summarized the effective use of physiognomy in several areas :

1. To discover or make friends
2. To select a life partner
3. To establish business partners and contacts.
4. In courts of justice to separate the innocent from the guilty.
5. Every teacher who is possessed of physiognomic skills will discern early and arrange principal classes among the hearers and what each class can or cannot receive.

However, physiognomy does raise some serious objections to the scientific mind as it may encourage a prying disposition and prove dangerous in the hands of the unscrupulous. When the conditions are improved each person will have room and the right opportunity to revel all its possibilities *(Sizer, 1885)*. An improvement in physiognomy is experienced corresponding to the amended character of a person *(William, 1882)* If men can take care of the internal, sufficient care of the external will be the result *(Lavator, 1806)* Therefore, when a person's attitude, temperament, way of life and cleanliness are changed, the face itself shows a change *(Wells, 1870)*

The facial characteristics were reviewed from the photographs of twenty leading scientists at Medical Photography Department of the Wellcome Library, UK. It was compared with their biographic sketches. These included Louis Pasteur *(Patrice, 1994)* Joseph Lister *(Turner & Lister, 1927),* Thomas Alva Edison *(Vanderbilt, 1971)* Benjamin Franklin *(Labaree & Bell, 1956)* Charles Darwin *(White & Gribbin, 1995)* Robert Koch *(Brock, 1999)* Frederich G Banting *(Levine, 1959)*, William Crawford Gorgas *(Gorgas & Burton, 1924)* Gregor Mendel, *(Heing, 2000)* Pascal *(Krailsheimer, 1980)* Joseph Priestly *(Gibbs, 1965)* William Henry Welsh *(Flexner & Flexner, 1993)* Albert Schweitzer (Ratter, 1950), John Romanes, *(Romanes , 1896)* Isaac Newton *(Hall, 1992)*, Walter Reed *(Bean, 1982),* Sigmund Freud *(Levin, 1975)* Rudolf Virchow *(Boyd, 1991),* William Harvey *(Vanghan, 1869)* and Galileo *(Fahie, 1903)*.

It was observed that the expected behavior based on physiognomic parameters of seven of the scientists showed some discrepancies when compared with their biographic sketches. For example, Albert Schweitzer has physiognomic features suggesting his being illogical, absent minded, self willed and emotional person. But his biographical sketch portrayed him to be systematic,

goal oriented, fair respectful and God fearing. Similarly, George John Romanes has physiognomic parameters suggestive of immaturity and dependence on others. But his biographic sketch showed him to be bright, analytical and popular.

Based on these observations, the authors feel that although a man may have particular facial features during the early years of his life, his character can be altered by his religious inclination, education, environment and attitude to life. Therefore we can judge a face in the present but we can not predict the future. The influence of circumstances also has its effect on character.

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